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# Communities of Practice: Using Blogs to Increase Collaboration

Teresa A. Byington



## Abstract

A community of practice provides a forum for professionals to exchange ideas and discuss concerns related to the profession. Within this forum, technology can eliminate many of the constraints face-to-face communities of practice encounter by providing a convenient and highly interactive environment. A description of how to set up an online community of practice using blogs is described. Blogging can support professional learning by giving teachers a platform for interacting and collaborating with other professionals. The steps for creating a blog are given.

## Keywords

technology, communities of practice, blogs, collaboration

Collaboration is the act of working together to achieve a specific objective. Special and general education teachers often coteach within an inclusive classroom. Collaborative teaching can be challenging, as each teacher enters a classroom with different education backgrounds, philosophies, and priorities (Mason, Thormann, O'Connell, & Behrmann, 2004). Whereas special education teachers have expertise in individualized instruction, general education teachers are proficient in curriculum content and classroom management (Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain, & Shamberger, 2010). These differences in teaching styles can lead to conflicts (Friend et al., 2010). Open communication, time for planning, and teamwork are required for effective collaboration (Damore & Murray, 2009). Leadership support,

professional development, and sufficient resources are also important factors (Damore & Murray, 2009).

Collaboration can benefit teachers by helping them feel valued and less isolated (Schlichte, Yssel, & Merbler, 2005; Schwab Learning, 2003). A supportive community that includes socialization, collegiality, and meaningful relationships is a protective factor against teacher burnout (Schlichte et al., 2005). A decrease in student referrals to

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special education and an increase in student achievement were found in collaborative models of instruction (Schwab Learning, 2003). Therefore, teachers can benefit from participating in support systems designed to increase collaboration and strengthen teaching practices.

### Online Communities of Practice

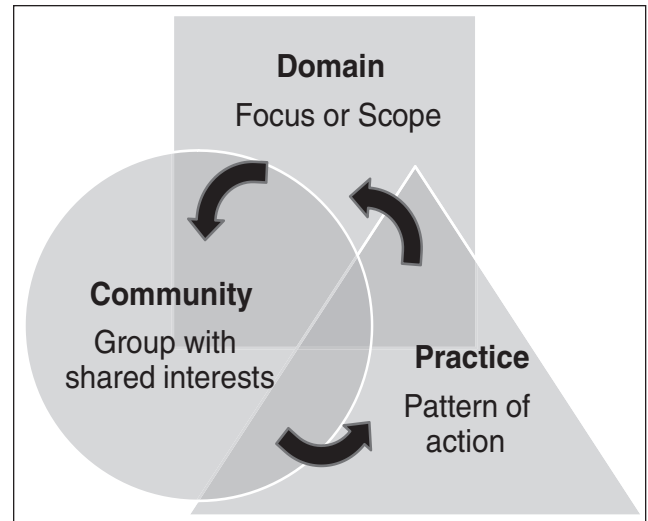
The emergence of computer-assisted learning environments has created new avenues for teacher professional development and reflection (Yang, 2009). Technology is playing an important role in the formation of online communities of practice (Guldborg & Mackness, 2009; Koch & Fusco, 2008; Wenger, White, Smith, & Rowe, 2005). Online communities of practice allow groups of people who are located in different geographical locations to connect (Kaulback & Bergtholdt, 2008). Meeting online can reduce the expense of face-to-face meetings, increase accessibility, and promote an effective use of time and resources. Online communities with highly relevant topics and meaningful contributions have been shown to thrive (Débe, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2005).

### Communities of Practice

Communities of practice (online or face-to-face) are groups of individuals focused on a common area of interest (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). They are distinguished from other groups by having members with sustained mutual engagement, a shared purpose or goals, and a common practice (Hara, Shachaf, & Stoeger, 2009; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Some communities of practice are formed to address an identified need (Hildreth & Kimble, 2008). For example, individuals interested in developing strategies for teaching students with disabilities could come together to engage in interactions designed to broaden the scope of knowledge and find solutions to problems (Wenger et al., 2002). General and special education teachers could form an online community of practice and discuss behavior management techniques, ways to differentiate instruction, and academic accommodations.

### Framework of Communities of Practice

According to Wenger et al. (2002), the framework of a community of practice requires three main elements: (a) domain, (b) community, and (c) practice. A balance needs to be achieved between these three interconnecting elements. As illustrated in the domain community practice (DCP) model (see Figure 1), the domain helps the members establish the common ground or focus of interactions. Once the domain is established, the community begins to form and examine the practice. Interest in the domain (D) brings the group together, the community (C) keeps the group connected, and



**Figure 1.** DCP model: Interconnecting elements of communities of practice

the practice (P) moves the group to action. These three interconnecting elements continue to flow in a cyclic manner as members of the community refine current understanding within the domain based on knowledge gained through practice.

The common background of the community gives members opportunities to interact and reflect on current practices. Relationships are formed as members share and receive knowledge. Once trust is built by members, the practice or established way of working can be refined. Knowledge gained within the community moves the group to action. The cycle continues. As the practice evolves, members reexamine and clarify the domain; the community is strengthened, and new patterns of action are implemented.

The domain of a community of practice could be a shared concern for meeting the needs of children with disabilities within an inclusive classroom. The community is built as members (e.g., special and general education teachers) share regular interactions on key topics such as strategies for teaching children with autism or how to teach social skills to students with emotional disorders. Best practices are built within the knowledge base of the members as they begin to implement new practices (e.g., using direct instruction with students with autism). The domain evolves and new connections are created. The three elements of domain, community, and practice provide the framework for the development of a community of practice. The DCP model demonstrates how these elements are interconnected and influence each other.

Technology can support the work of a community of practice by providing members with tools for collaboration. Within an online forum, members are able to discuss issues frequently. Participation is not limited by geography,

**Table 1.** Comparison of Blogs and Wikis

Blogs	Wikis
Online journal format providing commentaries and comments	Online database format providing collaborative writing
A single author writes individual posts	Multiple authors can write and revise any posts
Easy to identify specific authors	More difficult to identify specific authors
Does not allow open editing of posts	Allows open group editing of posts
A blog facilitator can screen and control information posted	Lack of controls on content posted
New users can comment on previous users' content but not erase it	New users can continually erase previous users' content
Posts listed in reverse chronological order (most recent first)	Structure determined by content and users. Can create any order or flow of information
Writing is usually personal, with a single perspective	Writing is usually objective, with multiple perspectives
Generally includes external links	Generally includes internal links to other wiki pages
Discussion oriented	Project oriented
Content grows slowly	Content can change and grow rapidly
Discussion takes place through comments to posts	Discussion takes place on pages of edited text
Allows for many enhancements such as graphs, graphics, video clips, and slideshows	More traditional webpage without enhancements
Tighter focus on editorial control	Group shares editorial control

allowing the perspectives of individuals from other states and countries to be shared. The diversity of the community can broaden the understanding of information through the knowledge base of the collective whole, which is always greater than that of a single individual. One great advantage of an online community of practice is the accessibility of resources. Many websites have been developed on educating students with disabilities and include strategies for teaching and classroom management. Teachers may gain greater knowledge through reading articles, watching video clips and slideshows, and completing learning modules.

### *Outcomes of Online Communities of Practice*

An online community of practice provides a forum for professionals to exchange ideas and discuss concerns related to the profession. Relationships are a key element of success (Hildreth & Kimble, 2008) and can bridge the gap between dispersed groups (Klein & Connell, 2008; Mitchell, McKenna, & Young, 2008). Opportunities to connect with others outside their field of expertise (e.g., general and special education teachers) help to strengthen members. The understanding and support of the group can increase capacity and positively impact individuals (Hildreth & Kimble, 2008; Mitchell et al., 2008; Yildirim, 2008).

### *Collaboration*

Collaborative teaching teams face challenges related to time, instruction, behavior management, and communication (Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2006). General and special education teachers need time to plan effective instruction and behavior management systems. Together they should

establish goals, modify lessons, and develop accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities. A new way of accomplishing these tasks is through online communities of practice using technology tools.

### *Technology Tools*

There are many technology tools available for use within online communities of practice, including email, wikis, discussion boards, chats, podcasts, and blogs. It is important to consider the ease of use of any tool selected (Wenger et al., 2005). Keep the access simple and related to common technology used within the workplace. Consider selecting technology with multiple levels of sophistication. As the community evolves, members may be interested in more challenging technology options. Wenger et al. (2005) found that the utilization of technology tools led to richer and more meaningful participation. The tool or tools selected should match the goals of the group. A comparison of blogs and wikis is given in Table 1.

Creating a successful online community requires not only technical skills but communication skills and abilities. An illustration of an online community of practice using a blog is provided (see Figure 2). This technology tool was selected due to ease of use and the fact that blogs have been shown to be an effective way of establishing and maintaining online communities of practice and helping members reflect on professional practices (Luehmann, 2008; Stiler & Philleo, 2003; Yang, 2009).

A blog can facilitate conversations within an online community by eliminating many of the constraints face-to-face communities of practice encounter. The online forum can support professional learning by giving teachers a platform

**Table 2.** Advantages of Blogs

Advantages of blogs	Importance to educators	Reference
No space or time constraints	Flexibility of participation	Luehmann and Tinelli (2008); Yang (2009)
Generally easy to use	Requires only basic technology skills	Stiler and Philleo (2003)
Allows exchange of ideas, experience, and knowledge	Beneficial to have interactions with educators from different fields	Luehmann and Tinelli (2008)
Forum for multiple perspectives and information sharing	Educators in diverse fields are able to share insights	Yang (2009)
Provides time for participants to reflect on learning process	Allows time to think about information shared	Luehmann and Tinelli (2008)
Convenient	Supports educators' busy schedules and educational demands	Hramiak, Boulton, and Irwin (2009)

for interacting with other professionals and providing a place to discuss current issues and trends (Yang, 2009). One of the advantages of a blog is the ability to add technology enhancements such as graphs, video clips, slideshows, and web links. Multiple technology tools can be utilized. In fact, a link to a wiki could be added to a blog to allow members the benefits of both tools.

**Blogs.** A blog or weblog is a type of website powered by software allowing the frequent addition of content similar to an online journal (Hill, 2006). According to Technorati's State of the Blogosphere (2009) annual report, more than 133 million blogs have been developed since 2002, and it is estimated that 175,000 blogs are created every day. The majority of bloggers stated that they blog to share their expertise and receive personal satisfaction. The most common rate of blogging is two to three times per week, with about 15% of bloggers spending 10 or more hours a week blogging.

Blogs are an interactive technology tool that allows individuals to post a message and receive comments from others. Posts are generally written using conversational language (Flatley, 2005) and archived for future reference. Individuals can record life events, write opinions, express emotions, and articulate ideas (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004). Educators are using blogs for student projects (Flatley, 2005) and training teachers (Hramiak, Boulton, & Irwin, 2009; Stiler & Philleo, 2003).

One advantage of blogs is the historical record of conversations that is archived. Participants of a blog can access information and documents at any time. The blog can provide a calendar of events and due dates for action items. Members can request help finding resources and share best practices. Blogs have potential as a powerful communication tool for collaborative groups. Participants can post messages and receive multiple responses. All members can view and read the correspondence. Group projects can be initiated and the work of the group can be coordinated through the blog.

It is easy for most individuals to learn how to use a blog (Stiler & Philleo, 2003). They allow an exchange of ideas and knowledge without space or time constraints. Blogs can

provide a forum for multiple perspectives as participants share experiences and expertise. Hou, Chang, and Sung (2009) found that blogs were an effective channel for sharing information and experience and allowed a person to step back, reflect, and analyze a current issue or situation. Blogs are convenient and provide opportunities to share opinions, express ideas, and pose questions (Hramiak et al., 2009). They can be restricted to specific invitees or open for public view. The advantages and disadvantages of blogs have been discussed in the literature and are important to consider (see Tables 2 and 3).

In a blog, members can post messages or make comments on a post. Members of the blog determine the topics of interest that will be discussed. Blogs can become small learning communities. A blog allows participants to learn at their own pace. Blogs are not limited to only posting and commenting. Other Internet tools can be used to increase learning and interaction. Hyperlinks can be added to allow blog participants the opportunity to do additional self-directed exploration at related websites.

Teacher trainees reflected on teaching practices and experiences with the use of a blog (Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008). Blogging was found to be a useful tool for professional development, as teachers involved weighed the pros and cons of an issue, displayed competence, critiqued self, and shared new teaching strategies (Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008). In addition, teachers received feedback and encouragement from others. Meaningful discussions took place that promoted both cognitive and affective growth and development. The blog provided a forum for networking and social interaction. Participation helped teachers become more familiar with the latest technology, which can influence the use of technology in the classroom. Hramiak et al. (2009) found that teachers comfortable with technology are more likely to engage students in the use of technology.

Teachers often lack social networks that can support their growth and development (Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008). Blogging can be a valuable asset to professional development, as participants gain insights by communicating ideas

**Table 3.** Disadvantages of Blogs

Disadvantages of blogs	Importance to educators	Reference
Requires access to technology	Lack of technology could limit participation	Yang (2009)
May experience technology difficulties	Technology support needs to be available	Stiler and Philleo (2003)
Posting of incorrect information or off-topic discussions	A facilitator should be assigned to monitor posts	Yang (2009)
Limited knowledge construction	Members need to be encouraged to share and develop knowledge	Hou, Chang, and Sung (2009)
Easy not to participate	Participation needs to be reinforced (e.g. sending reminders to members)	Yang (2009)

**Table 4.** Common Blog Web Publishing Sites

Blog site	Number of users	Cost	Ease of use	Features
Blogger.com	8,911,336	Free	Easy	Set up an account in 3 easy steps
Windows Live Spaces: Windowslive.com	27,000,000	Free	Moderate	Social networking and blogging
WordPress.com	1,115,004	Free	Moderate	Must find own web host, customized themes and good storage capacity
LiveJournal.com	26,900,000	\$19.95/year	Moderate	Private journal, blog, a discussion form and social networking
TypePad.com	Not reported	\$8.95 to \$14.95/month	Moderate	Paid service, no advertising. Customize blog designs and build online communities
Edublogs.org	567,000	Varies depending on services chosen	Moderate	Designed for teachers, students, and institutions

and giving feedback (Luehmann & Tinelli, 2008). It also allows for reflective thinking on the learning process (Yang, 2009). Preservice teachers stated blogs were a useful forum for reflecting and communicating with other teachers and it was easier to post comments and challenge peers in a blog rather than in a face-to-face context (Yang, 2009).

## Steps to Creating a Blog

One of the first steps to creating a blog is to select a web publishing service and optional hosting service. Some of the popular web publishing companies include Blogger, Windows Live Spaces, Live Journal, WordPress, Edublog, and Type Pad (see Table 4). Several of these companies provide the option of selecting either basic free services or upgraded services for a fee; however, free services generally include advertisements. It is best to try out the services of several different companies to determine which web publishing service is best suited to the needs of the group.

The steps for creating a blog using Blogger.com (<http://www.blogger.com>) are described. Blogger is a web publishing service, operated by Google, used to create your files or pages. Blogspot is an optional service that can be used to host your blog. Blogger works with any modern browser; it is free and easy to use. Blogspot is free but contains a minimal amount of advertising.

## Create an Account

Begin at <http://www.blogger.com>. The webpage states, "Create your Blog now." First set up a Google account with a username and password or log in as a current Google user. Items to be completed include creating a display name and accepting the terms of service.

## Name Your Blog

Select a name that is unique, is interesting, and reflects the main purpose of your blog, such as *Teachers Connect*. Use your blog name or a simple phrase for your blog address (URL). Check the availability of the name. If your choice for a name (e.g., TeachersConnect) is unavailable, select a similar name such as TeachandConnect. All blog addresses will end in [blogspot.com](http://blogspot.com) unless you select to use a different web hosting service.

## Select a Template

A selection of templates will appear. Templates vary in color, font, size, and types of sidebars. A template formats the webpages and adds personality. Select a predefined template or create your own. Following this step, a message stating "Your blog has been created" will appear.



**Table 5.** Blog Topics and Suggested Web Links

Blogs topics	Suggested web links
Current Issues in Special Education	The Council for Exceptional Children: <a href="http://www.cec.sped.org">http://www.cec.sped.org</a>
Effective Teaching Practices for Children With Learning Disabilities	National Center for Learning Disabilities: <a href="http://www.ncld.org/">http://www.ncld.org/</a>
Behavior and Classroom Management Learning Strategies	The IRIS Center, Professional Development Modules and Resources: <a href="http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/resources.html">http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/resources.html</a>
Response to Intervention (RTI)	
Helping Parents Participate in the Individual Education Program (IEP) Process	National Dissemination Center for Children With Disabilities: <a href="http://www.nichcy.org/Pages/Home.aspx">http://www.nichcy.org/Pages/Home.aspx</a>
Assistive Technology Considerations	
Transition Planning for Youth With Disabilities	
Positive Behavior Support	Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports: <a href="http://pbis.org">http://pbis.org</a>
Family Support Services for Students With Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities	American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities: <a href="http://www.aidd.org/index.cfm">http://www.aidd.org/index.cfm</a>
Differentiating Instruction	Learning Disabilities Online: <a href="http://www.ldonline.org">http://www.ldonline.org</a>
Teaching Strategies for Students With ADHD	
Reading and Learning Disabilities	
Teaching Social Skills to Children With Emotional and Behavioral Disorders	Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders: <a href="http://www.ccbd.net">http://www.ccbd.net</a>
Ways to Reduce Teacher Stress	
Autism: Teaching Tips	Autism Research Institute: <a href="http://www.autism.com">http://www.autism.com</a>
Academic Accommodations for Children With Autism	

### Start Posting

Use the Posting/New Post tab to create a new post. All posts should contain a descriptive title. Type in a title and then write a post. Formatting can be added to the post by using the compose bar, which provides a selection of fonts, font sizes, bold, italics, text color, alignment, block quote, and numbered and bulleted lists. The eraser icon allows the removal of formatting from a selection. Additional options on the compose bar include spell check and add an image, video, or link. To add a link, highlight the text and click on the add link icon. A box will appear. Add the URL and click OK. The linked text will now appear underlined in blue. When the post is completed, click *Publish Post*. Select *View Post* or continue to add new posts, edit posts, or write comment on existing posts. Every time a new post is added, it will appear at the top of the blog. Additional tabs under *Posting* include edit posts, edit pages, and comment moderation. Examples of blog topics and suggested web links related to students with disabilities are found in Table 5.

### Settings

Many different options are available to personalize a blog. The Setting tabs include Basic, Publishing, Formatting, Comments, Archiving, Site Feed, Email and Mobile, Open ID, and Permissions. A few of the features under this tab will be described. Under Settings/Basic, provide a blog title

and description. Under Settings/Formatting, select the numbers of posts that will be viewed on the main page. Choices are given for date header format, time stamp, time zone, and language preference. Under Setting/Archive, select the frequency of archiving (e.g., daily, weekly, monthly, or no archive).

### Layout

The layout formats the look of the pages. The Layout tabs include Page Elements, Fonts and Colors, Edit HTML, and Pick a New Template. Change or edit formatting under Layout/Page Elements. Add or rearrange page elements and add a gadget such as text, pictures, slideshow, video bars, newsreel, profiles, or search box. There are also some fun options such as *Add a Poll*. To create a poll, type in a question such as "What grade do you teach?" and provide multiple choice answers (e.g., K–2, 3–5, 6–8, 9–12 grade). Members of the blog can then select a choice and the blog will calculate the number of responses for each answer. Another gadget option allows members to create a list. The list could include favorite children's books. Type in the names of the books and Blogger will supply the names of the authors, ISBN numbers, a website to purchase the book, and even a picture of the book's cover. Layout/Fonts and Colors list options for changing the text color and font of your blog. Layout/Pick a New Template provides a number of templates that can be selected and previewed.

## Permissions

Determine whether the blog will be public and available for everyone to view or if it will be private and only selected members will be allowed viewing privileges. Public viewing is the default option. To make the blog private, select Settings/Permissions. The options for who will be able to view this blog include Anybody, Only readers I choose, or Blog authors. A blog can have up to 100 authors. It is recommended that controlled membership be utilized by selecting the option of Blog authors. This means that only teachers invited to participate will have access to the blog.

## Add Team Authors

A team blog allows a small group of people to contribute to a single blog. One person creates and maintains the blog, and additional people are added as authors or members of the blog. Add new authors under *Settings/Permissions*. Click on *Add Authors*. List the email addresses of each person in the *Invite People* box. Click *Invite* and Blogger will send an email invitation link to each person.

## Joining the Team

Prospective members receive an email invitation to join the blog, and the invitation includes a link to follow in order to join. The link leads prospective members to a page to either create a Google account or sign in. Once the person is signed in, the blog will be listed on the person's dashboard or main page. Team members can add, edit, or delete their own posts but not the posts of other members. The blog settings cannot be changed unless the creator of the blog allows a member to share administrative duties.

## Email Announcements

Each time a new post is added to a blog, members of the blog can receive an email announcement. Under Settings/Email, select add email to BlogSend Address. Individual email or group email address can be listed. An email will be sent to everyone on the list whenever a new post is added to the blog.

## The Blog

An example of a blog page is shown in Figure 2. The blog is titled *Teachers Connect*, with a focus of connecting special and general education teachers. The left-hand column shows the most recent posts on teaching children with ADHD and response to intervention (RTI). Comments can be viewed by clicking the pencil icon. The dates and times of each post are listed, along with the author's first name and topic tags (e.g., ADHD, Teaching Tips and Techniques,

RTI). The right-hand column includes a video clip of the week, blog list, link list, topics of recent entries, and links to the blog archive by month and year. The archive can be referenced at any time and allows members to view the historical record of past conversations. Many other features can be added to a blog, such as pictures, slideshows, polls, newsreels, RSS feeds, and participant profiles. Frequently changing the content of a blog is an effective way of keeping members interested in visiting the site.

## RSS Feeds

RSS, or Really Simple Syndication, feeds are a method of distributing blog entries beyond the blog site. Syndication means to distribute items to multiple places. Blog entries can be syndicated to newsreaders, which are websites or desktop programs that display contents of the feeds. To subscribe to a blog's feed, select the subscribe icon or link on the blog. Feed readers such as Google Reader allow a person to read posts from multiple blogs from one location.

## Other Web Publishing Sites

The features provided by other web publishing sites such as Windows Live Spaces are similar to Blogger. Windows Live Spaces is a social networking site with the addition of a blog. Windows Live Spaces is a little harder to navigate, and the pop-up ads can be distracting. Some sites such as WordPress provide only web publishing services, and a different hosting site must be found. Many web publishing sites offer different levels of features. Basic features are free and advanced features cost a monthly or yearly fee. The main advantage of paid services is no advertising.

## Setting Up an Online Community of Practice

The first steps to setting up an online community of practice are to determine the focus of the community of practice and identify who would be interested in joining (Kimball & Ladd, 2004). Keep the scope of the community wide enough to interest diversity of membership but narrow enough to maintain focus. The community of practice needs to provide a meaningful forum that is beneficial to its members. Technology should be chosen that promotes ongoing interactions and increases collaboration.

## User Level of Expertise

It is important to determine the level of technological expertise among potential members. A survey (see Figure 3) can be used to access abilities and interests. The complexity of an online environment can influence the level of participation. Difficulties with technology can inhibit participation



### Teachers Connect

*A blog to connect special and general education teachers.*


Monday, June 28, 2010

**Teaching children with ADHD**

I am looking for strategies for teaching students with ADHD in my 4<sup>th</sup> grade classroom.

Posted by Mary at 5:25 PM

Topic Tags: **ADHD, Teaching Tips and Techniques**

2 comments 

**Mark said** I have found it is best to ignore as much negative behavior as possible and give lots of attention to appropriate behaviors. I give my students lots of opportunities for physical movement by allowing them to run errands or pass out materials. I assign each student a "study buddy" to assist with organization.

June 29, 2010 at 8:10 AM

**Susan said** I provide my students with ADHD some type of squishy thing to manipulate and use both verbal and visual instruction. I break assignments into smaller tasks so the student completes the first three problems and then comes and sees me so I can monitor progress. There are also some great idea at <http://www.idonline.com> under ADHD.

June 30, 2010 at 6:47 PM


Friday, June 25, 2010

**Response to Intervention (RTI)**

I just watched a great learning module on RTI by the IRIS Center (See Link List). I would love to hear more about how you are using RTI at your school. Thanks.

Posted by Elizabeth at 7:31 PM

Topic Tags: **Response to Intervention (RTI)**

3 comments 

**Video Clip of the Week**

The Inclusive Classroom  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5WCX-998vs&feature=related>

**Blog List**

Reality 101 – CEC's Blog for New Teachers  
<http://cecblog.typepad.com/>  
 Autism Community Awareness Blog  
<http://www.blogged.com/blogs/autism-community-awareness.html>

**Link List**

The Council for Exceptional Children  
<http://www.cec.sped.org>  
 National Center for Learning Disabilities:  
<http://www.nclld.org/>  
 The IRIS Center, Professional Development Modules and Resources  
<http://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/resources.html>

**Recent Entries**

ADHD  
 Autism  
 Behavior & Classroom Management  
 Differentiating Instruction  
 IEP  
 Learning Disabilities  
 Positive Behavior Support (PBS)  
 Reducing Stress  
 Response to Intervention (RTI)  
 Teaching Tips and Techniques

**Blog Archive**

2010 (127)  
 June (17)  
 May (29)  
 April (16)  
 March (24)  
 February (21)  
 January (20)

**Figure 2.** Sample blog page

(Wenger et al., 2005). Therefore, it is best to keep technology basic and present members with participation opportunities that are simple to learn and use.

### Rules of Engagement

Participants need to understand the rules of engagement within an online community. Clear expectations of etiquette, shared practice, and knowledge exchange must be given. Written guidelines should be shared with all potential members. One way to accomplish this task is through the development of clear induction materials. Members can be asked to sign a participation agreement stating the rules of engagement will be followed.

### Membership

Invite potential members to participate. Usually some of these individuals are already networking informally, and an online community of practice can help to formalize and

expand these relationships. Identify leaders who can help to facilitate involvement and coordination. Communities of practice are more successful if membership is voluntary (Hildreth & Kimble, 2008). Kimball and Ladd (2004) recommend creating a welcome kit that includes an invitation to join, articles on communities of practice, rules of engagement, frequently asked questions, contact information, and a small gift, such as a box of chocolates.

### Online Only or Hybrid

Online communities of practice can be developed using either an online-only or hybrid approach. In the online-only community, all activities take place in the online environment. The hybrid approach combines both online and face-to-face meetings. A comparison of face-to-face and online communities is given in Table 6. Hildreth and Kimble (2004) found that technology use can sustain communities of practice between face-to-face events. A teacher's daily schedule usually does not allow much time to interact with other professionals;

Please rank your level of expertise for each of the following from 1 (Low) to 5 (High).					
	Low		Medium		High
Internet	1	2	3	4	5
E-mail	1	2	3	4	5
Blogs/Blogging	1	2	3	4	5
Adding links to text	1	2	3	4	5
Texting	1	2	3	4	5
Using mobile devices	1	2	3	4	5
Creating a webpage	1	2	3	4	5
Using Templates	1	2	3	4	5
Importing photos	1	2	3	4	5
Managing audio and video files	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Please provide the following information:</b>					
Name:					
E-mail:					
Topics of interest:					
Blog(s):					

**Figure 3.** Accessing levels of technology use**Table 6.** Comparison of Face-to-Face and Online Communities of Practice

Face-to-face communities	Online communities
Membership limited to geographical area	Membership is not limited to geographical area, allowing for diverse representation
Requires a location for meetings	Requires access to Internet
Face-to-face meetings can be expensive (time and space)	Online meetings have no additional expenses; effective use of time and resources
Meetings are held on specific dates and times that may not be convenient	Members can access the online community any day and select convenient times to participate
Members are engaged in time-limited face-to-face interactions (e.g., discussions, small-group projects)	Members are engaged in an interactive online environment (e.g., online modules, blogs, wikis, RSS feeds) without time limitations
Online resources are usually not shared or accessible	Online resources are shared and accessible
An archive of communications is not available	An archive of communications is available
Technology enhancements are generally not used	Many technology enhancements, such as slideshows, video clips, and graphics, can be used

however, with an online community of practice, teachers have a place to share experiences and discuss teaching strategies

outside the school setting. A description of using a hybrid approach for a community of practice is described.

## Hybrid Approach

Invite potential members to attend an introductory meeting to discuss the purpose of the online community of practice. Begin with a getting-to-know-you activity. Demonstrate the functions of the blog and review rules of engagement. Allow participants to familiarize themselves with the technology by creating some posts on a chosen topic. The first meeting is a good time to assess the level of technological expertise of members. During the meeting, give teachers opportunities to make personal connections with the members of the group. Following this initial meeting, the community of practice should include face-to-face meetings and online activities.

## Successful Online Communities of Practice

A successful online community of practice requires time and effort. It can sometimes be difficult to engage members initially within an online environment (Kaulback & Bergtholdt, 2008); however, providing support and encouragement can keep members focused and increase participation (Woollis, Restler, & Thayer, 2008). A leadership team should be appointed to help manage and encourage participation. Factors relevant to successful online communities of practice include leadership, topic relevance, and supportive organizational environments (Dubé et al., 2005). These elements can help to build collaboration between special and general education teachers.

### Leadership

A small group of key participants should be identified to provide leadership to an online community of practice (Ramondt, 2008). The main role of the leadership team or facilitators is to keep the community of practice focused, foster relationships with members, and build best practices. The leadership team can keep the conversations moving forward and make sure fresh material is being added to the blog. They can help ensure that the information shared is accurate and up-to-date. The leadership team needs to include both general and special education teachers and model collaborative practices. Information on how to coteach, facilitate small-group activities, and provide appropriate accommodations and modifications can be shared. New teachers can be mentored and the latest research given.

Additional roles can include providing online facilitation and assisting with any technology issues. Leadership is essential for keeping the momentum going and involving all participants. Select leaders with time, energy, and a strong knowledge base. Online technology skills are essential. Key participants will keep the community of practice active and relevant.

## Levels of Participation

Members of communities of practice tend to participate at one of three levels. According to Wenger et al. (2002), about 10% to 15% of members form the core group and lead discussions. Another 15% to 20% are active participants and contribute to discussions. The remainder of the members participate at a peripheral or lower level of involvement, with sporadic or no participation.

The leadership team can reinforce participation by sending reminders to members to encourage participation. They can post questions, research issues, and help members reflect on practices. A facilitator can be chosen to keep members aware of “hot topics” and invite experts to add posts to the blog or participate in a question and answer session. They can model warm and inviting responses. Kimball and Ladd (2004) recommended assigning members a buddy to help develop relationships. Special and general education teachers can be paired as buddies and invited to collaborate on a joint project, such as compiling resources from the web on a specific area of focus.

### Topic Relevance

A community of practice requires a clear purpose and audience. Discussion of topical issues should be discussed within the context of member’s interests and expertise. It can be helpful for members to create lists of key topics of interest (Ramondt, 2008). Entries or posts should focus on one main topic and be given clear, meaningful titles or topic tags to let members discern items of interest. Posts can be coded to help members identify whether information is being given, help is needed, or only socialization is taking place. The member’s interpretation of a subject area is what makes a blog interesting to read. Topics designed to interest both special and general education teachers could include effective teaching practices, RTI, positive behavior support (PBS), and developing individualized education programs (IEPs).

### Supportive Environments

The online climate should include social interactions with members to establish trust and rapport. Supportive environments encourage greetings, use of first names, expressions of thanks, and positive feedback (Ramondt, 2008). Photo galleries and online polls can add an element of fun to the group. Hibbert (2008) found that once members of an online community of practice formed meaningful relationships and trust, members began to share real stories related to professional concerns. Therefore, online communities of practice benefit from a leadership team, a clear purpose, and a supportive environment.

## Member Benefits

Members of online communities of practice receive many benefits. They can help each other understand best practices and gain expertise. Participants can become both the teacher and the learner as they engage in reflective practice (Chapman, 2008; Hibbert, 2008). Discussions within communities broaden a person's focus on developing solutions to challenges through participation in the active and complex process of learning (Hibbert, 2008). Hibbert (2008) found that the collaborative support from community members helped teachers stand up for what was best for students.

Communities of practice help members establish a baseline of knowledge and then move on to higher levels of thinking by examining current beliefs and practices within a safe environment (Wenger et al., 2002). Seasoned teachers can be given opportunities to share successful experiences with novice teachers on a specific topic, such as RTI. Within a blog, links to websites, learning modules, video clips, and research articles on RTI could be shared. Novice teachers can discuss contemporary teaching ideas with experienced teachers. Through conversations, teachers begin to develop a sense of belonging and collective identity. The strength of the community of practice increases as members take ownership or responsibility for the success of the community. Students benefit from teachers who are engaged in applying effective teaching techniques and implementing research-based practices.

## Conclusion

Promoting and supporting collaboration between general and special education teachers is essential to student achievement (Schwab Learning, 2003). Involvement in an encouraging community can reduce teacher isolation and increase problem solving (Schlichte et al., 2005). Teachers involved in collaborative models such as communities of practice reported fewer discipline problems, were happier, and had higher levels of teaching success (Schwab Learning, 2003).

Technology is providing new opportunities for creating professional connections within the field of education by eliminating time and space constraints. Connecting new and experienced teachers can assist teachers in addressing the needs of students with a broad range of disabilities. One method of bringing teachers together is through an online community of practice. As described in the DCP model, interest in the domain brings the groups together, the community keeps the group connected, and the practice moves the group to action. A blog can support professional learning by providing a platform for teachers to interact with other professionals (Yang, 2009). As an effective channel for sharing information and experiences, a blog gives teachers time to reflect and then act upon knowledge gained.

Online communities of practice allow teachers to collaborate (Habhab, 2008; Hildreth & Kimble, 2008; Yildirim, 2008), solve problems (Wenger et al., 2002), and transfer best practices (Mitchell et al., 2008). Communities of practice help members understand the meaning behind experiences (Hansman, 2008), gain insights (Mitchell et al., 2008), foster innovation (Yildirim, 2008), and prompt change (Cox, 2005).

Meeting online is an effective use of resources and can increase the diversity of group membership by eliminating distance barriers. The facilitation of this supportive environment by a strong leadership team will promote professional development and increase collaboration between special and general education teachers.

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